

The USD-N/Iraqi Canine Program Partnership

By Sergeant First Class Kelly McCargo

Just a few years after the successful U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, insurgents exchanged their ineffective conventional attack methods for simpler, but deadlier, improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The insurgents placed IEDs alongside roadways and covered them with debris—or they directed suicide bombers to detonate them. U.S. and Iraqi security forces quickly responded to this new threat by “up arming” troop transports. However, a more long-term solution involved locating the explosives before they were detonated.

Military working dogs (MWDs) could potentially locate explosives and munitions caches; therefore, forces from U.S. Division–North (USD-N)—an area of northern Iraq that includes Ninewa, Salah ad Din, Kirkuk, Dahouk, Irbil, Diyala, and Sulaymaniyah Provinces—initiated an informal canine partnering program with Iraqi police. The U.S. and Iraqi police intermittently met two or three times per month. However, inconsistent meeting locations and times resulted in logistical problems with scheduling the use of training equipment, acquiring specialized subject matter experts, and reserving weapons ranges and obstacle courses.

In November 2009, the USD-N/Iraqi Canine Program was formally established to build a better bond between the United States and the Iraqi Police Canine Corps “brothers in blue,” shape the way Iraqi canine policing is conducted, and allow for collaboration (information sharing and interagency problem solving) that benefits both agencies. Meeting times and locations have now been standardized so that both forces can plan and prepare accordingly.

Iraqi police canine teams are no longer certified by U.S. forces; certification is now acquired at the Baghdad Police College and is granted by the Government of Iraq. However, USD-N Task Force Marne MWD teams provide training in the areas of basic dog obedience, elementary detection, and veterinary medicine.

Veterinary classes, which address the care and maintenance of dogs, are tailored to specific Iraqi canine teams. The focus of the first ten classes is on basic dog care (checking temperature, inspecting teeth), but later classes cover splinting broken legs, treating open wounds, and addressing dog trauma.

One of the U.S. Army Staff sergeants from the 51st Military Police Detachment, Fort Lewis, Washington,

was skeptical about whether some of the experienced Iraqis from the Diyala Province would be receptive to U.S. training—especially from a female. Two of the Iraqi students had 16 years’ experience with dog handling, and the captain who was in charge of the Iraqi program had 20 years’ experience. The female staff sergeant began by teaching basic dog obedience, using commands such as *sit* and *stay*, and progressed to the point where the Iraqi students verbally led their dogs through obstacle courses. “We started to train them, and they just listened to what we had to say, and they took our recommendations,” she said. “They were very, very receptive to our training and asked a lot of questions because they really wanted to learn. They wanted to know how we work because they want to make their program as successful as ours.”

To further facilitate the partnership, Iraqi police canine teams have an open invitation to “shadow” U.S. dog handling teams during daily operations. This grants the Iraqi teams access to more than forty U.S. Army dog handling teams throughout the USD-N region.

Will all of the effort and money required to train and finance this program pay off? “Absolutely,” said the Task Force Marne MWD program manager. “I see successes just about every day . . . because of the [dog handling] teams.” For example—

- An 885th Military Police Detachment sergeant and her MWD found an explosive cache near the Iraqi village of al-Kafia in Ninewa Province. U.S. and Iraqi security forces confiscated a 1-pound bag of ammonium nitrate; a rocket-propelled grenade launcher; 6 antitank land mines; 2 100-millimeter, high-explosive artillery rounds; a 122-millimeter, high-explosive round; and 17 empty land mine casings.
- Iraqi police canine teams were mobilized to help avert attacks during the most recent festival of Ashura.¹ “There was an IED explosion several weeks ago [in Diyala Province] that hurt and killed a lot of people, so they sent an [Iraqi army] patrol through the area to clear it. The patrol said it didn’t find any bombs, but when one of the [Iraqi army dog] teams went through, they found a 155-millimeter artillery round—modified into an IED—covered in trash beside the road. The [explosive ordnance disposal team] was called in and destroyed it, and no one was hurt,” said the staff sergeant from the 51st.



A U.S. MWD team accompanies a combined U.S. and Iraqi police patrol through an Iraqi neighborhood.

- An Air Force staff sergeant from the 9th Security Forces Squadron and his MWD discovered eight mortar rounds buried at a farm east of Hawijah in Kirkuk Province.
- A 148th Military Police Detachment sergeant and his MWD discovered 132- and 152-millimeter, high-explosive artillery rounds that had been modified with a radio control detonation device along a highway located 20 miles south of Rabiya in Ninewa Province.

Iraqi police intend to mirror their canine program after that of the U.S. military police. Some U.S. Soldiers compare the current state of the Iraqi program to the state of the U.S. Army program when it was created on 13 March 1942. “If you break the Iraqi Police Canine Corps program into crawl-walk-run phases, we could place the Iraqis at an ‘accelerated walk’ phase,” said the senior enlisted advisor for the Task Force Marne Provost Marshal Office. “Their program is in its infancy; it’s fairly recent and growing just as ours was then.”

But, according to a staff sergeant from the 51st, “They definitely have the leadership and the willingness to learn. Slowly but surely, they are having successes; and you can definitely tell that [the program] is growing stronger as time goes on. The fact that the program is between the ‘walk’ and ‘run’ phases is due only to the lack of dogs and funding. Once they get more dogs and funding, then they will be totally running.”

When the Iraqi people see how many lives can be saved and understand the importance of the dogs, the program will receive more support. Eventually, it will be as successful as the U.S. military dog handling program.

Endnote:

¹Ashura is a Shi’a Muslim festival that takes place on the tenth day of the holy Muslim month of Muharram. It marks the death of the prophet Muhammad’s grandson, Imam Hussein.

Sergeant First Class McCargo is the operations noncommissioned officer, Public Affairs Office, 3d Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, Georgia.